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ABSTRACT

The question of who should go to college cannot be answered without the issue of disestablishment. Too many people and students are frustrated and blocked because there is no other place to go but college, and the college or university itself is becoming a less inviting place as time goes on. True, some institutions have instituted a policy of open admissions, only to throw half of those admitted out at the end of the first year; and others have instituted Black Studies programs, which are a direct imitation of the nonsense of the traditional curriculum. In the past, university admission was limited to relatively few, and the institution could maintain its mystique as the citadel of humanistic learning and concern. Now that the institutions of higher learning are admitting about half the high school graduates, it has become obvious that the university has always functioned as an agent of the state and of special political interest groups within it and that its elitism has less to do with the higher reaches of thought and culture than it does with the bourgeois aspiration of "making it." If there were really open admissions, then every individual would have to be given access to public support for education and opportunity. It would also mean that the university could not be the only avenue of entry, and that society should support also the education of those who didn't get into college. In addition, the academy must turn back to its central function of making culture manageable and inventing forms of discourse, study, and analysis. (AF)

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OPEN ADMISSION TO WHAT?*

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The phrase "troubled campus" always seems to suggest student protest, sit-ins and demonstrations. Until recently, whenever the subject came up among university administrators, the discussion quickly turned to the ways that students could be managed or problems solved or conflict minimized. It rarely dealt with the substantive questions of higher education or the larger society. Very few people were either willing or able to undertake the more radical questions which students and some younger faculty members were trying to ask: Is the university a hierarchical monster not unlike the Catholic church on the eve of the Reformation? Is higher education itself a system of dubious legitimacy which sells indulgences in the form of degrees, credits and certification? Is the academy a collection of vested-interest politicians trying to maintain the sanctity and perogatives of their own enclaves-departmental structures and grant-supported principalities called institutes, programs, and studies? To what extent is the traditional organization of knowledge-that is the old disciplines-to what extent are these things unrelated to the experience and problems of contemporary life? To what extent is academic expertise itself not a product of civilized study or an example of useful knowledge but rather a system of mumbo-jumbo, a closed little society with no interest in real-that is living-questions? To what extent has "reason" itself become a weapon of dehumanization, exclusion, obfuscation, and brutality? What alternatives exist to the present system of higher education? Where can people go if they don't go to college?

For the last couple of months I have been reading some rather curious declarations and prophesies by academic administrators. The campus is quiet, they seem to be saying (or quieter than it was two years ago). We have become more sophisticated in handling our students. I am not certain whether that quietness is a thing of the moment or whether it will last. If it does last it will indicate to me that we are in worse shape than we were two years ago when students believed that the campus and the world could be substantially reformed, that presidents-university presidents, presidents of the United States-would listen, would be concerned, would do more than watch Ohio State and Purdue on television. If it is true, it doesn't indicate that things have improved, but that students have given up. Undoubtedly some campuses have been 'democratized" through the addition of students to various policy-making bodies, the elimination, in some instances, of some forms of military research, and the introduction, in some places, of new programs-especially in the area of black studies. It is also true, of course, that some universities are planning to institute some form of open admission in response to militancy by black organizations and by civil rights groups.

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I am extremely doubtful, however, that these reforms will amount to very much in anybody's life or for the society in general. Open admission to what? To a college? To a program? To a course? To a degree? There are a number of state university systems, as you know, which have admitted anyone with a high school diploma and which control enrollment (and perhaps standards) by throwing half of those who are admitted out of college at the end of the first year. It may well be that such practices represent a social declaration of faith in the average man. It may also be that open admission, or anything approaching it, will generate much more pressure for campus reform-for new courses and new ways of dealing with students. I suspect, indeed, that one of the great revolutions in higher education may just be gathering momentum. Whatever sit-ins and protests accomplished-and they clearly accomplished something, even if the faculty was its chief beneficiary--it may seem small compared to what seems, however subtly, to be happening now. And that is that students are slowly revolutionizing the campus simply in their selection of courses, in voting with their registration cards no confidence in some of the traditional liberal arts programs, and in chosing independent study, urban studies and a variety of other "Glamour" programs in their place.

Still, open admission may, by itself not so much create but reflect a more fundamental change in higher education. In the past decade the mystery started to go out of the enterprise. The academy became worldly in the wrong way, which is to say that it developed worldly power and influence but that it failed to invent the forms of discourse, study and commitment which would make the great tradition of humanism which it always professed applicable and vital for the problems of the present. It has become increasingly clear that the doctor--the man of learning--supposedly the man of learning--is another technician, a journeyman, a man for hire, and that the field in which his competence has been certified is just one of many in a pluralistic culture in which there is no way of verifying the cultural supremacy of any particular endeavor. Who is to say that four years of study of literary criticism is in some fundamental way more valuable--more cultured, more humane, more "educated"--than four years of serious exposure to rock music or merely four years of life in an alien culture. It is perfectly clear that a person who wants to learn physics should engage himself as apprentice to a journeyman physicist and that such a journeyman will--and should--prescribe the course of study. But what authority, what wisdom, does he have for setting out a general curriculum? In what way is his experience superior to that to any other adult when it comes to the construction of a course of liberal studies or indeed to the management of a university? Who is to say in this age that what we used to know as Western Civilization is in some way intrinsically superior to any other culture? I have my own reservations about some of the things that are practiced, for example, under the name of black studies both in the secondary schools and in colleges. But I cannot see how they are any more silly than some of the things practiced under the name of sociology, history, or literature. Indeed what worries me the most is that the travesties that go under the name of black studies are direct imitations of the nonsense of the traditional curriculum. Adorning one's speech with a little Swahili is after all not so far from the common preciousness of a phrase in French or Latin. Rote learning of black irrelevancies is no great improvement over the memorization of white trivia. It may be possible to make a case for Western Civilization--despite Auschwitz and Hiroshima, despite Vietnam, and the massacre of the Indians--but the case is not now being made in the universities. The call for relevance among students was nothing more than a plea to university

faculty and administrators to make their learning, which meant Western Civilization, applicable and persuasive in the contemporary world. But it hasn't happened, even if the campus seems quiet.

Simultaneously something else happened in taking the mystery--the mystique if you will--out of higher education. As long as college was something for a small minority, as long as it was associated with an aristocracy, it was possible to maintain the belief that the special privileges which higher education conferred or certified were legitimate, that somewhere in those ivy halls, those libraries and laboratories, there burned a special light, that there existed a special commitment which enabled men to control spirits and to master powers and incantations which were not shared by ordinary mortals. It is probably true that all of this was never more than an illusion. The special privileges of elites and the special languages they spoke probably derived from places and positions outside the academy, and the great works of the scientific and literary imagination were probably created as much in defiance of formal institutions--church and state--as they were fostered by them. Nonetheless, the illusion survived. Moreover, enough people did gain access to the elite through higher education to maintain it. But when a decade ago higher education ceased to be a province of the small minority and became accessable to a minority that approaches half the population the breakdown began. At that point the university had to begin making good on its claims, and a growing number of people began to discover the inadequacies behind the facade of enlightenment, reason and higher learning. People who took seriously the more noble professions of higher education--who regarded themselves, or hoped to become, perhaps with vanity or arrogance, the heirs of humanistic learning and concern--suddenly discovered that that was not what the large university was really about, that indeed all students and many teachers were subject to a rat-race which often rewarded academic operators, opportunists and charlatans as richly as it honored those with genuine commitments to study and learning. They learned that the university had begun to function as an agent of the state and of special political interest groups within it and that its elitism had less to do with the higher reaches of thought and culture than it did with the bourgeois aspiration of making it. They discovered moreover, that, as an institution, the university behaved no differently from other corporate organizations; it was large, bureaucratic, and tended more often than not to serve the interests of the state. In any case, it resisted those interests less often than it should have resisted them.

The cry for relevance has always been confusing because it lacked sufficient definition. The university became very relevant to the worldly aspiration of certain agencies of government and to the aspiration of people who were upwardly mobile and who sought from it special training and credentials for particular jobs. At the same time, the university itself and certain departments in particular have become highly irrelevant in dealing with the cultural problems of our time or in relating wheatever was worthy in the great traditions of the West to them. The university in other words has too often traded cultural influence for worldly position.

Much of this you have heard before but I felt it had to be said because the question "who should go to college?" cannot really be answered without confronting the issue of disestablishment. Kingman Brewster of Yale has spoken about the involuntary campus, a place of enforced membership. The point is simply this: that too many people and certainly far too many students are frustrated and blocked

because there is no other place for people to go. If we ask the question "who should go to college?" we will never be able to give satisfactory answers until real alternatives exist and until going to college itself is pruned to those things which are of substantive value. At the moment the society subsidizes the education of those who can make it into college. It does almost nothing for those who cannot. It honors, however, suspiciously, people who are students but it disparages dropouts, hippies and other individuals who have no visible means of support and no legitimate "job." There is considerable evidence that what happens, in fact, is that lower income tax payers pay a disproportionate share of the cost of public higher education and that the children of higher income families enjoy a disproportionate share of the benefits. Until the society is willing to subsidize educational opportunity for every individual no question about who should pay for college education and who should decide who should go to college can be answered satisfactorily. The whole point of open admission--if it were really open admission--would be to give every individual access to public support for education and "opportunity." I doubt if this can be done or even approached if such support is channeled through the already cumbersome and often self-serving bureaucracies that now manage higher education. There is no reason why support shouldn't go directly to the individual--and that means to all individuals--to use where, when, and how he sees fit. At the same time, the matter of certification should be separate from the processes and institutions which offer the training or the education to which such certification is suppose to testify.

In the last few years the institution of higher education has been preoccupied with two related problems. The first is the concern with inventing techniques for handling student discontent; the second is concern with meeting the growing reluctance of the people and its legislatures to support colleges and universities in the manner to which they have become accustomed. Both, of course, are related to the thingI have called the end of the mystery. People are simply not as snowed, as overawed by formal higher education as they were five years ago. The course of statesmanship in higher education, it seems to me, is to press hard for universal opportunity not necessarily within the structure of the formal institution of higher education, but in a much wider variety of situations: apprenticeships, trade schools, internships, travel, and so on. Open admissions only carries with it that fatal urgency when college is the only place to go. But in an open society, presumably, the idea of open admissions cannot be related to one avenue of entry. As long as universities continue to try to control all entry we will all be in deep trouble.

Finally, the academy must itself turn back to its central functions, which is to make the culture manageable, to invent forms of discourse, study, analysis, and criticism which organize experience. This may mean cutting across or simply disregarding existing disciplines and the currently favored ways of study, research, and "reasons." It may mean collaborative work among all students and teachers, not in planning still more courses and curricula, but in inventing ways that the world can be understood; the curriculum should, in other words, consist primarily of an ongoing critique of knowledge, the continuous writing, if you will, of a book. The academy has learned to manage almost everything--students, legislatures, pesticides, football teams--except the fateful problems of culture itself. And that has been--and should always be--its primary task.